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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 001616

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE. NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/PASCUAL

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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM CONTACTS DISCUSS MUGHRABI GATE RAMP

REF: A. AMMAN 02483
 B. AMMAN 01483
 C. JERUSALEM 00792

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Palestinian officials in press and privately criticized alleged Israeli plans for the Mughrabi Gate entrance to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. A Waqf official said the Jerusalem District Committee's guidance for construction is too ambiguous, and that unilateral Israeli actions could ignite unrest among Palestinians. The Jerusalem Municipality and attorney Danny Seideman told PolOff that criticism of these plans is based on outdated blueprints, and that the Jerusalem District Planning Committee has changed guidance for the ramp plans in order to preserve Muslim ruins. Construction of the new ramp will be delayed by several months because of appeals to the National Planning Committee. End summary.

PALESTINIAN CRITICISM
OF PLANS FOR NEW RAMP

¶2. (C) Recent Palestinian press stories reported criticism by PA and Muslim religious officials of alleged Israeli plans to build a synagogue on Ottoman ruins under the Mughrabi Gate ramp leading to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City. Palestinians also criticized the UNESCO World Heritage Committee for accepting an Israeli proposal for the new ramp. Among those who spoke out against the plan were the Jerusalem Advisor to PM Fayyad, Hatim Abdal Qadar, and Shaykh Ra'id Salah.

¶3. (C) Yusuf al-Natshah, Director of Tourism and Archeology for the Waqf, in a conversation with PolOff on August 27, said much of the criticism was based on outdated plans for the ramp. However, he criticized the Jerusalem District Planning Committee's revised plans as too ambiguous. Based on the revised plan, he said, Israeli architects and builders have room to replace Arab ruins with Jewish spaces. He warned that, if the GoI undertakes unilateral work at the Mughrabi Gate, it could spark an "unpredictable" reaction from "angry" Palestinians, which would complicate negotiations.

¶4. (C) Al-Natshah told PolOff the Waqf wants the new ramp to follow the route of the old ramp as closely as possible, in order to preserve the status quo. He said UNESCO plays a weak role in the discussion over the ramp and cannot successfully coordinate the project. He said he is concerned that the GoI will portray Jordan and the Waqf as complicit in unilateral GoI actions, which would undermine the Waqf's credibility.

SEIDEMAN: CRITICISM BASED ON OUTDATED PLANS

¶5. (C) Jerusalem attorney Danny Seideman told PolOff August 13 that UNESCO did not accept the Israeli proposal carte blanche, and that Palestinian criticism in the press is based on earlier plans that included a Jewish prayer area under the new ramp. Seideman, who presented objections to the original blueprints on behalf of Jerusalem-based NGO Ir Amim, said the District Planning Committee accepted most of those objections.

¶6. (C) Seideman told PolOff August 27 that the GoI has become more transparent in the planning process, allowing him and others to influence ramp plans. He said the National Planning Committee has allowed at least one Palestinian group to appeal ramp plans, though hearing appeals is not required by law and could set construction of the ramp back by several months to a year. Seideman said this will give all parties more time to weigh in on the final ramp plan.

DISTRICT COMMITTEE ACCEPTED
OBJECTIONS, REWORKING RAMP PLANS

¶7. (C) Osnat Post, Head of the Jerusalem Municipal Planning Division and a member of the District Planning Committee, told PolOff August 27 that the District Planning Committee issued a directive to redraft the ramp plans with guidance that the new ramp not contain Jewish prayer spaces and must preserve archeological remains under the ramp from a range of historic periods. She said claims to the contrary are based on incorrect information.

¶8. (C) Note: ConGen confirmed, using an OSC-translated summary of the District Committee's report, that the

JERUSALEM 00001616 002 OF 002

Committee's guidance for designing the ramp states that "preservation of findings from all historical periods shall be ensured" and adds that "there is no room to enable...using spaces that have not yet been opened for prayer purposes." The report also says the proposed ramp route should be "related to the original route" and the ramp "is expected to serve as a main passage for the security forces, should the need arise." For the full text of the OSC translation, see the ConGen's classified website at http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/jerusalem/ind_ex.cfm and click on the link for Political Reporting Attachments. End note.)

WALLES